

# The State of Jail Industries

**by Robert J. Gorski, Ph.D.,  
Director, PHILACOR, and  
Victor J. Jacobsen, Criminal  
Justice Consultant, United  
States Manufacturers  
Corporation**

In June 1984, former U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice Warren E. Burger convened a conference called "Factories Within Fences" to provide a platform for discussing the importance of work and training for inmates in the corrections system. The conference generated great interest in, and enthusiasm for, correctional industry programs. Since then, as never before, a tremendous amount of attention has been focused on the idea of operating industries within the walls of prisons and jails.

In times of lean budgets, rising jail populations, and increasing outside intervention, a properly managed correctional industry can be of great value.

The main objective of this attention is to transform prisons and jails from human warehouses into productive work places that contribute to the community in a variety of ways. As a result, new and innovative

programs have been started across the country. These programs have received support from the private and public sectors, the judicial and executive branches of government, and the academic community.

The concept of correctional industries is not new. State and federal correctional systems have been using industries as a way of managing inmates for at least a century. Programs have grown from the simple manufacturing of bricks and license plates to such complex industries as drafting, printing, computer programming, and even travel-related services, such as hotel/motel and airline reservations.

The benefits and shortcomings of operating a business within a correctional facility are documented and available for correctional administrators to study. In times of lean budgets, rising jail populations, and increasing outside intervention, a properly managed correctional industry can be of great value. Industries can reduce idleness,

provide valuable work experience for inmates, realize a profit to supplement existing resources, and help inmates earn money to support their dependents on the outside, thus

reducing families' dependence on public support.

## Trends Supporting Jail Industries

Several trends exist within the field of corrections and criminal justice that strongly support the concept of prison and jail industries. Prison and jail crowding, alternative sentencing, judicial support and attention, and the cost of incarceration all point to the value and feasibility of correctional industries.

**Crowding.** At the end of 1988, the nation's jail and prison populations were at an all-time high. The number of state and federal prisoners exceeded 450,000, and rates of arrest and conviction gave no sign of relief.<sup>1</sup> By 1990, there were more than one million jail and prison inmates. The U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that in 1988, 14,314 state inmates were being held in local jails waiting for bed space in state facilities.<sup>2</sup> Data included in the same report indicate that relief is not in sight; increasing numbers of prisoners were being housed in state and federal prisons, and an additional burden was being placed on local jail facilities.

With the rise in prison and jail populations, an increasing number of inmates find themselves in close physical quarters with no release

mechanisms for the stress that is associated with crowding. Idleness is particularly pervasive in local jails, most of which were constructed as short-term holding facilities for a basically transient inmate population. Neither space nor constructive programming is available in the majority of jails, and inmates have little, if anything, to occupy their time.

Inmate idleness has been cited in many cases, dating back to one of the earliest conditions of confinement cases, *Pugh v. Locke* (406 F Supp 318 (MD Ala 1976). 406 F Supp at 329). The court specifically mentioned "overwhelming idleness" as one of the conditions that led it to conclude that the conditions violated "any current judicial definition of cruel and unusual punishment. . . ."

**Alternative sentencing.** Many communities are increasingly using alternative sentences that emphasize the use of sanctions other than incarceration, diverting offenders from jail to less secure residential facilities. Alternative facilities include community-based correctional centers and residential work release, alcohol/drug abuse treatment, and community work programs. These facilities offer a less restrictive environment in which industries can be operated with fewer custody and security concerns. An industry attached to this type of facility can be an excellent community resource and may

produce sufficient revenues to become self-supporting.

**Judicial support and attention.** At the 1984 "Factories with Fences" conference, Chief Justice Burger noted that "the number of inmates who enter our prisons as functional illiterates, lacking any marketable skills, is staggering." He encouraged correctional systems to work with private industry in establishing "real work" experiences for inmates, stating that "the key to every good system is work, work, work, along with education and vocational training."<sup>3</sup>

Chief Justice Burger was also instrumental in establishing the National Center for Innovation in Corrections at George Washington University, which was in operation from October 1985 to November 1988. The center's purpose was to "enhance the use of prison industries to alleviate idleness caused by overcrowding; increase productivity through prison industries; and establish programs designed to help inmates defray some of the costs of incarceration."

**Costs of incarceration.** The costs of building and maintaining secure facilities continue to rise. Although the cost of constructing a jail cell can range from \$25,000 to \$75,000, the cost of maintaining the average inmate in a prison/jail environment

can be anywhere from \$11,000 to \$20,000 a year, equivalent to the cost of a college education.

Programs that defray these costs are most attractive. In 1984, the National Association of Counties (NACo) awarded its Outstanding Achievement Award to a county that implemented an alternative work program for alcohol-related driving offenses. This program provided the county with 230 persons who worked on county road improvements and saved the county an estimated \$50,000 in incarceration costs and 5,500 manhours in labor.

In 1989, NACo took a strong policy stand in support of the development of jail industries.<sup>4</sup> This position emphasizes the involvement of jails,

Warren Burger stated that "the key to every good system is work, work, work, along with education and vocational training."

organized labor, and the business community so that industry programs can realize their fullest potential.

A number of counties have implemented inmate work programs. For example, Dade County, Florida, has a landscaping program; Middlesex County, New Jersey, has an auto repair program; and Hennepin County, Minnesota, is producing picnic tables that are sold within the county. Other programs include repair of county vehicles,

park benches, and picnic tables and refurbishment of garbage dumpsters. Many of these programs can be developed into revenue-producing businesses that will help the local government offset some of the costs of incarcerating and supervising offenders.

### **The PHILACOR Program**

With a population of more than 5,000 inmates, the Philadelphia prison (jail) system had a definite need to provide useful programs for inmate participation. Thus PHILACOR, the system's correctional industries division, was established as a method to reduce inmate idleness and increase productivity. Currently, 301 inmates participate in eight basic industries at three facilities in the system.

**Philadelphia Industrial Correctional Center.** Industries underway at the Philadelphia Industrial Correctional Center (PICC) include programs in manufacturing and refurbishing furniture:

- The furniture manufacturing program is made up of several components. In the carpentry area, inmates assemble component parts. In a second area, upholstery, inmates upholster new furniture and reupholster furniture from other government agencies. Inmates also perform wood finishing of newly assembled products and refinish items, including delicate antique

furniture, sent to PHILACOR for specific refinishing processes.

- In the furniture refurbishing program, inmates refinish metal furniture, including desks, file cabinets, tables, and other pieces, which are recycled back into the system. It is interesting to note that, if this industry did not exist, most of the metal furniture being refurbished would have been discarded by the government, because refinishing it is not cost-effective except in the prison setting.

### **Philadelphia House of Correction.**

This facility operates three industry programs: a laundry, a dry cleaning plant, and a general products plant.

- The laundry and dry cleaning operations clean all clothing, linens, and other items used in the Philadelphia system.
- The general products plant is responsible for making mattresses, mops, and pillows and for plastic engraving.

**Holmesburg Prison.** Holmesburg, the maximum security unit of the Philadelphia system, houses three industrial operations:

- A barricade manufacturing operation makes all of the barricades used by the Philadelphia Police Department.
- Holmesburg inmates manufacture all cloth items used by the inmate population, including shirts, pants,

sheets, pillow cases, and bakers' Shirts.

- A Holmesburg plant prints all of the forms used in the prison system as well as doing general printing for other government agencies.

Industries in the development stage are outdoor furniture, street signs, office systems furniture, restaurant management, landscaping, and janitorial services. This expansion will allow the system to provide employment for a total of 500 inmates.

Any inmate may apply for the industries program at the facility where he/she is being held. The only requirements are a desire to work and the physical ability to do so. Training is provided on the job by industries staff who are both journeymen in their trades and qualified correctional officers. Inmates usually remain in the program for the duration of their incarceration; the average length of stay is ten months for sentenced individuals and six months for those without sentences.

**P**HILACOR is dedicated to involving as many inmates in the program as feasible, while generating revenue that can be used to partially offset costs of incarceration. Sales of products and services will exceed \$1 million in the 1990 fiscal year.

The industries program has faced some opposition from labor unions,

whose leaders argue that it takes jobs away from union workers. Gradually, however, the unions are realizing that the program is necessary to offset incarceration costs and that industries perform

**Jail industries have the potential to reduce the tax burden to the community that results from expanding, maintaining, and operating jails—or at least keep it from increasing.**

work that would not be done otherwise.

It is anticipated that in the 1991 fiscal year, PHILACOR will assume total responsibility for operating the industries program. Specifically, PHILACOR will purchase all supplies for the industries and will sell its services at cost to the system and other agencies. Under this organization the program should net a savings of \$2.5 million per fiscal year. Eventually PHILACOR will incorporate as a nonprofit organization.

### **Jail Industries Today**

Under National Institute of Corrections (NIC) sponsorship, the Institute for Economic and Policy Studies, Inc., conducted a survey in 1984 to assess the status of jail industries. The primary audience of the survey was the nation's sixty-nine largest jail systems, which operate the 100 largest jails. The resultant report also included in-depth interviews with officials at

the thirteen jails known to be operating industries<sup>5</sup>

Since that initial study NIC and the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) have joined forces to support the development of **jail industries nationally. Under an NIJ grant, a team of experts has developed a resource manual to assist jail managers in the**

development and daily operation of industry programs<sup>6</sup> Throughout fiscal years 1990 and 1991, NIC and NIJ will support this development by conducting regional training workshops and providing short-term technical assistance.

### **The Future of Jail Industry**

Can correctional industry work in jails? We believe it can and must. Public policy makers and correctional administrators have a responsibility to ensure that local correctional systems are operated as efficiently as possible. An industry has the potential to reduce the tax burden to the community that results from expanding, maintaining, and operating the jail-or at least keep it from increasing.

In addition, the courts have made it clear that idleness in facilities is not acceptable and that meaningful work and program experiences for inmates are most desirable. Last, and most important, the inmates stand to benefit the most from correctional

industries. Industries provide work experience, dignity, and a better chance to succeed in the workplace upon release.

**F**or further information, contact Robert Gorski at PHILACOR, 8301 State Road, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19136, or call (215) 335-7134.

---

### **References**

1. "Record 454,138 in Prisons as Crime Rates Fall." *New York Times*, August 28, 1984.
2. U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. "Prisoners in 1984." *Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin*, April 1985.
3. Burger, Warren Speech presented at George Washington University, Washington, D.C., June 15, 1984.
4. Miller, Rod. "County Jail Industries Gaining Momentum" *County News* 21 (November 20, 1989): 14.
5. Institute for Economic and Policy Studies, Inc., and National Institute of Corrections. *The Development of Jail Industries*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Corrections, 1985.
6. Sexton, George E., Rod Miller, and Victor J. Jacobsen. *Operating Jail Industries: A Resource Manual*. Washington, DC.: National Institute of Justice, in press. ■